

VIOLETTA KOSTKA (Gdańsk/Poland)

## **Expressionist features of the opera *The Anointed* by Polish composer Tadeusz Kassern**

Tadeusz Kassern was born in Lviv in 1904 and from 1922 lived in Poznań. Since his early youth he was drawn to music, especially composition, but began making his living as a lawyer. As a composer he had his first notable success in 1928. His impressionistic *Concerto for Voice and Orchestra* won second prize in a competition organized by the Association of Young Polish Musicians Society in Paris, for which the judges included Ravel, Roussel, Honegger and Schmitt. After a two-month stay in Paris in 1930, Kassern began composing pieces in neoclassical style, also venturing into other neo-styles. Of his prewar work the most successful—besides *Concerto for Voice and Orchestra*—were: *Concerto for String Orchestra*, *Symphonic Poem “Dies Irae” for Orchestra*, *4 Copernicus Motets for Mixed Chorus* and *“Orava” Suite for Two Solo Voices and Mail Chorus*.

Kassern, an assimilated Pole with Jewish roots, spent World War II partly wandering and partly in Warsaw using identity papers for the name Teodor Sroczyński—an office worker. From the end of 1945, thanks to his legal practice, he worked in the Polish Consulate in New York, organising aid for musicians in Poland and popularizing Polish music in the United States (Figure 1).

In December 1948, for political reasons, Tadeusz Kassern broke off his co-operation with the Polish government and settled in New York as an emigrant. Almost for 8 years he had been living as a stateless person when finally in 1956 he gained immigrant status. Kassern worked hard as a teacher in the Third Street Music School Settlement and the Dalcroze School of Music, as a lecturer at the New School for Social Research and also as an arranger at The New York City Opera. The fact of emigrating did not diminish his ability to create, but it definitely changed its direction and focus. He composed many compositions for children and youth and three stylistically different operas: the 4-act opera *The Anointed* which represents expressionism, the 1-act opera *Sun-up* which is a mixture of neoclassicism, folklorism and interval structuralism, and the 2-act opera *Comedy of the Dumb Wife* written in pure neoclassical style. Although the



Figure 1: Tadeusz Kassern in 1948. (Files of K. Dymaczewska.)

composer had considerable competition in the USA, some of his previous and new works were performed and published there. He died in 1957.

From the start of his life in emigration, Kassern's creative efforts were concentrated on the opera. In May 1949 he received a grant from the Kussewitzky Music Foundation to compose *The Anointed*,<sup>1</sup> thought as a "musical monument" to commemorate the holocaust. It is clear from his correspondence that the initial inspiration for the opera came in 1943 during the Jewish Ghetto Uprising in Warsaw. He wrote to Julius Rudel:

The idea of composing *The Anointed* (...) received a strong impetus during the war years when being in Poland under the Nazi occupation I witnessed the most inhuman tragedy that befell the Jewish nation. Since that time the urge to contribute a musical monument to Jewish history never left me. After the war in Poland, I was offered a large commission to write an opera. I suggested *The Anointed* as a ghetto uprising memorial, but I was severely rebuked and forbidden to write this opera because the Communist Government considered it as favoring Jewish 'nationalistic' tendencies and this the Communists strongly opposed. You will understand why I am so deeply attached to writing and doing this work here in this free country.<sup>2</sup>

As we consider further the problem of the genesis of Kassern's opera, we need to emphasise that it was driven by an inner compulsion, a mysterious spiritual force that urged him, to fulfil a moral and ethical duty, to convey a message. In this respect, the opera's genesis appears consistent with a typical expressionist approach.<sup>3</sup>

With the encouragement from the Foundation, the composer turned to a play known to him from before the war<sup>4</sup>—*The End of Messiah* by the

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Michał Kondracki, "Zgon Tadeusza Kasserna" [The Death of Tadeusz Kassern], in: *Kultura* 9 (1957), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Tadeusz Kassern's letter to Julius Rudel from 22.10.1950, Warsaw University Library, Kassern's correspondence, K-LXXXI.

<sup>3</sup>According to Tomasz Baranowski, "Expressionism conceives of the role of inspiration not so much in the sense of sudden illumination, but rather as confirmation of the expressive needs of the artist, as an uncompromising conviction of the importance of his own, human message. The understanding of art in the terms of a prophetic mission points in turn to the aspect of the artist's ethical involvement." Tomasz Baranowski, *Estetyka ekspresjonizmu w muzyce XX wieku* [The Aesthetics of Expressionism in the Twentieth Century], Białystok 2006, p. 63–64.

<sup>4</sup>In 1937 Kassern wrote about the play that it was a full of expression work. Cf. Tadeusz Z. Kassern, "Inauguracja nowego sezonu operowego w Teatrze Wielkim. 'Ijola'" [In-

Polish playwright Jerzy Żuławski<sup>5</sup> and on the base of it he wrote a libretto in English. It tells about a certain event from the history of Turkey in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: a Jewish uprising against a sultan, the aim of which was to win freedom. The leading hero of the performance is a Jewish ascetic Sabbataj Cwi, who suffers the pain of his nation but is at the same time above it. He believes that he is a messiah and renounces the earthly pleasures. Staying before the sultan Mohammed IV Cwi tries to force him to grant the Jews territory on which to recreate their lost statehood. His mission, however, does not come to a fortunate end. His pretended divinity turns out to be weaker than his love for his wife Miriam.<sup>6</sup>

Preparing himself to composition Kassern must have taken into consideration his previous musical styles and also music composed at the moment by American composers. Having lived some years in the USA he learnt that expressionism of the Viennese School had very high position there. This was the consequence of Schönberg's presence in the USA since 1933 and the increasingly frequent performances of his music, but above all of the lively engagement of his disciples in popularizing the 12-tone technique. There are at least two evidences of Kassern's interest in musical expressionism during his stay in New York. First is that as the Polish consul he was preparing in 1948 the Polish premiere of *A Survivor from Warsaw* by Arnold Schönberg,<sup>7</sup> but because of the emigration he did not finish his work. The second is that in summer of 1950 during courses organized by New School for Social Research, he taught the subject called *Origin of Opera—Survey of its Growth (1600–1950)*, which included problem of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*.<sup>8</sup> We also know that in 1947 Polish composer was absolutely aware of great popularity of expressionism in the United States. After the conclusion of the WNYC American Music Festival in New York in

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auguration of a new opera season in Teatr Wielki. "[Ijola]", in: *Dziennik Poznański* 8 X (1937), No. 233, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Jerzy Żuławski, *Koniec Mesjasza. Dramat w IV aktach* [The End of the Messiah. A Drama in Four Acts], Lwów 1911, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Warsaw 1918.

<sup>6</sup>The theme presented is among the most well-known of Jewish themes and has frequently been exploited in literature and music of the 20th century, for example by Nathan Bistritzky, Aleksander Tansman and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

<sup>7</sup>Felix Greissle's letters to Arnold Schönberg of 5<sup>th</sup> October and 8<sup>th</sup> November 1948, Arnold Schoenberg Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington.

<sup>8</sup>[Bulletin] New School Summer Session 1950, New York, 08.05.1950, Warsaw University Library, T. Z. Kassern Collection.

February 1947 he wrote to an acquaintance in Poland: "Basking in radicalism, atonalism and a weird mixture of Schönberg, Berg and Paul Hindemith is typical of the youngest generation."<sup>9</sup> Although Kassern was previously reluctant to the Viennese School planning his opera *The Anointed* in 1949 he changed his mind. He took as a highest composer constraint logic of expression understood as connections between expression (a transmission of internal world of one's experiences) and form.<sup>10</sup> It opened him the door to use many different musical means of which some were from expressionist style of Schönberg and Berg.

The opera *The Anointed*<sup>11</sup> was composed for a very large cast: 10 singers<sup>12</sup> and a four-part mixed chorus as well as for a huge orchestra with a range of characteristic instruments,<sup>13</sup> and for many extras and dancers. A chorus from one side and percussive instruments like maraca, tambourine, tamburo militare, legno and triangle from the other side have been introduced to illustrate musically two culturally distinct ethnic groups. Although, there is no experimental exploitation of individual instruments, we can observe countless rapid changes of instrumentation, which assure the work a rich range of colour. The main colour of the opera is created by timbre of xylophone, vibraphone, harpsichord and harp (Figure 2).

About an organisation of sounds in this opera Michał Kondracki wrote in 1957 that it was atonality "and at the same time something like contradiction to it."<sup>14</sup> Today, when we prefer a term "posttonality" to "atonality" and accept Stravinsky's idea that posttonal music could be "arranged in

<sup>9</sup>Tadeusz Kassern's letter to Stanisław Wiechowicz from 18.03.1947, Warsaw University Library, Kassern's correspondence, K-LXXXI.

<sup>10</sup>The term used by Reinhold Brinkman, after Ernst Bloch, to explain connections between expression and form in the output of Schönberg. Cf. T. Baranowski, see note 3, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Manuscript of the score in Warsaw University Library, catalogue number Mus. CCXXV rps 1.

<sup>12</sup>Messiah—baritone, Miriam—soprano, sultan—tenor, prophet—tenor, talmudist—tenor, muezzin—tenor, sultan's doctor—tenor, janissary leader—baritone, Grand Vizier—bass, Moslem High Priest—bass.

<sup>13</sup>Instruments of orchestra: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 *B* flat clarinets, *B* flat bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 *F* horns, 3 *B* flat trumpets, 2 tenor trombones, bass trombone, tuba, 4 kettle drums, triangle, tambourine, tamburo militare, cymbals, bass drum, 2 maracas, Chinese block, tam-tam, xylophone, vibraphone, harpsichord, harp, violins, violas, cellos and double basses.

<sup>14</sup>Michał Kondracki, "Życie muzyczne w USA" [Musical life in the USA], in: *Ruch Muzyczny* 1957, No. 3, p. 10–11.

*Act 1. Scene 1.*

# Sinfonia

Maestoso. (d: ca 50)

**TADEUSZ KASSERN**

Flauto piccolo 12  
2 Flauti 2  
2 Oboi 12  
2 2  
Corno ingl. 2  
2 Clarinetto Bb 12  
2 Clarinetto basso Bb 2  
2 Fagotti 12  
2 Contrafagotto 2  
I. III. 12  
4 CORNI (F) 2  
II. IV. 2  
5 Trombe (BF) 12  
2 Tromboni 2  
Trombone basso e Tuba 2  
Tromboni 12  
Tamb. milit. 2  
Kilofano 2  
Clavicembalo 12  
2  
Arpa 2  
Vialino I 12  
2  
Vialino II 2  
Viola 12  
2  
Violoncello 2  
2  
Basso 2  
2

Figure 2: *The Anointed*, act I, scene 1, bar 1. Manuscript of the score in Warsaw University Library, Mus. CCXXV rps 1.

different way” than by “emancipation of discord” or by precompositional row,<sup>15</sup> Kassern’s music seems to us as posttonal and at the same time based on a few semantic structures which function also as sonic centers. The above means that each section of the opera is composed in 12-tone scale or in such a scale without 1, 2 or 3 sounds, that in each section dominates dissonant harmony but there is no overload of dissonant intervals in horizontal structures and that from time to time semantic structures/sonic centers appear. *The Anointed* includes seven semantic structures: (1) Messiah’s theme opening with a perfect fifth upwards, (2) Miriam’s diatonic theme, (3) a theme of Jews composed of perfect fourths, (4) a polycord composed of a major chord and a minor chord in interval of an augmented second symbolizing a state of Israel, (5) sultan’s theme beginning with a second and a tritone upwards, (6) a tritone theme of sultan’s court and (7) a harmony of a major second symbolizing an empire of the sultan. It is characteristic that all themes are composed of short motifs, which Kassern treated as independent structures and used in proper moments of score.

Just mentioned stable elements of the opera and all the other horizontal, vertical and mixed structures coexist in *The Anointed* in a multilayered texture with the number of layers ranging from two to five.<sup>16</sup> The main layer is a solo part or a duet or a chorus, while the other layers are instrumental. Kassern practices here a rule: if one layer is built on a very narrow range of notes, then another extends this range or even completes it to the 12-tone scale. The number of layers, their types and rate of change depend on moment of the story. Very often we can listen to a texture which includes the voice or chorus accompanied by instrumental counterpoint appearing above it, a phenomenon known in music since Schönberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*. The play of textures has obvious connections with sonorities and semantic structures of the opera.

The individual sections of the work range between two extremes of content: the state of madness, unease, fear, permanent tension and a contrasting state of gentleness, calm, love and awakened hope. Typical of this

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Alicja Jarzębska, *Z dziejów myśli o muzyce. Wybrane zagadnienia teorii i analizy muzyki tonalnej i posttonalnej* [From the history of musical thought. Selected problems of theory and analysis of tonal and posttonal music], Kraków 2002, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup>The term ‘a multi-layered texture’ was used among others by Paweł Szymański in his article, “O heterofonii—próba definicji” [About heterophony—an attempt of definition], in: *Zeszyty Naukowe Zespołu Analizy i Interpretacji w Krakowie* No. 4, Kraków 1979, p. 7.

opera, but also of expressionism, are expressions of the first type resulting from different kinds of conflicts between Sabbataj and Miriam, Sabbataj and the sultan, a talmudist and other Jews, a talmudist and sultan's court, sultan's court and the Jews, Sabbataj and imagined God.

Instead of traditional arias and recitatives we find here very emotional and modern vocal lines. Appropriate expression Kassern obtains by differentiating of all musical parameters but mainly by intervals. There are no permanent connections between the words and the music, but two different tendencies are obvious. The first one consists in combining the words expressing such feelings and emotions as pain, fear, irritation, anger and hate with chromatic motifs, motifs built on great intervals like sevenths and ninths, motifs built on tritones and perfect fourths, motifs based on Schönberg's *Sprechgesang* technique and glissandos. The second tendency relies on connecting the words expressing love, hope and tranquility with motifs built on melodic triads, either complete or incomplete but supplemented by transitional and adjacent sounds (Figure 3).

In contrast to solo vocal parts, choruses are composed mainly of traditional elements: narrow musical scales, form of a song with refrains, the alternation of syllabic choral singing and melisma solo singing. Typical of the choruses inspired by hymns is homorhythmic texture while the other kinds of choruses are conspicuous by contrast polyphony or short-motif polyphony with pauses.

The result of the multilayered texture is above all dissonant harmony. It is possible to listen to in one layer two- or three-note combinations built most commonly out of seconds, fourths, tritones, sevenths and ninths, sometimes polychords, but the harmony of all layers at one moment is much richer. We can stand out here a few degrees of intensity. The lowest level of intensity comes into being when layers are very close to each other, the highest—when layers represent very different dissonant structures, for example dissonant blocks of sounds, chromatic figures and glissandos.

The composer's choices in realms of tempo, metre and rhythm also can be explained in the light of logic of expression. Let's take for example methods of operating of metre. Like in previous Kassern's works typical here is successive polymetre interweaving with simltanic polymetre. Always, when a tension of action goes upwards Kassern increases the frequency of metre changes, and when it goes down he introduces more regular solutions.

Although individual sections of the work are highly varied, syntax of the work looks to be based on some rules. It is possible to recognize that



*Lento sost.* 213 *Più mosso*

Pic. *sf*

Fl. *sf*

Cl. *sf*

Clb. *sf*

Cor. *I Solo* *pp*

Tre. *sf*

Tbn. *sf*

Xc. *sf*

Hrp. *pp* *p* *pp*

*Lento sost.* 213 *Più mosso*

Mir. *(pours water from a jug on the chest in the corner of the room - brings the cup to Sab. lips)* *p* *3* *p dolce*  
Here... drink... Sabba... mine...

Sab. *(pushes back the cup - groans)* *p* *pp* *Oh* *Oh*  
It had to be so... the Lord takes revenge...

V.I. *pp* *div. in 3.* *p*

V.II. *pp* *div. in 3.* *p*

Vla. *pp* *div. in 3.* *p*

Vc. *pp* *div. in 3.* *p*

Cb. *pp* *div. in 3.* *p*

Figure 3: *The Anointed*, act III, scene 1, bars 213–215. Manuscript of the score in Warsaw University Library, Mus. CCXXV rps 1.

every section is developed by junction, imitation, contrasting and other methods. The respective musical-dramatic parts of the opera are joined together either by superimposition, or by sequencing. Concluding sections are characterized by reduction of the number of layers, dropping musical phrases and lowering of volume. Each scene, with one exception, ends with a choral song accompanied by instruments.

An interesting aspect of this opera is that Kassern introduced to the score the names of *Sinfonia*, *Scherzo*, *Adagio* and *Rondo finale* as additional qualifications for acts, what recalls somewhat the formal solutions of Berg's *Wozzeck*.<sup>17</sup> Kassern's treatment of the listed musical forms, which create a certain kind of analogue to a symphonic cycle, is very free, the overriding aim being to fulfil the dramatic conception. Only Act III—*Adagio*—has a notable similarity to an instrumental *Adagio*. A symphonic *Adagio* is always the most lyrical movement of the cycle, and so it is also in Act III of the opera, which is wholly based on Sabbataj's monologue and the lovers' dialogue. What is more, we also find here the skeleton of the threepart form: the extreme vocal-instrumental parts are divided by an instrumental *Passacaglia passionata*—*Love music* that contrasts with them in very many aspects.

*The Anointed* is not a historical opera, although it may appear as one. It opens many ways of interpretation. According to one of them it is a symbol of Jewish's fight for freedom irrespective of the time and place and more over—a symbol of any suppressed nation. According to the other interpretation, the opera may be regarded as a musical-historical monument. While watching Jews on stage and listening to music of which some is of Jewish origin we are to remember that it was human beings who created the holocaust and other calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Recently Kassern's compositions are beginning to attract interest in Polish music circles. Premieres of his works for children and youth started to take place in the 1990s and the crowning event was the National Tadeusz Kassern Competition for Young Pianists in Gdańsk in 2006. The opera *Comedy of the Dumb Wife* was staged for the first time at the Music Academy in Gdańsk in 2006, and a changed version of it was performed at the Great Theatre in Poznań in 2011. In 2009 in Warsaw a concert was held with musicians performing a range of stylistically varied songs for solo

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<sup>17</sup>Berg's opera consists of three acts: Act I—Five Character Pieces, Act II—Symphony in Five Movements, Act III—Five Inventions.

voice and piano. In 2010 in Nałęczów near Lublin music lovers had the possibility to listen to selected fragments of three Kassern's operas. Unfortunately, the whole opera *The Anointed*, considered by the composer as his *opus vitae*, has not been staged yet.